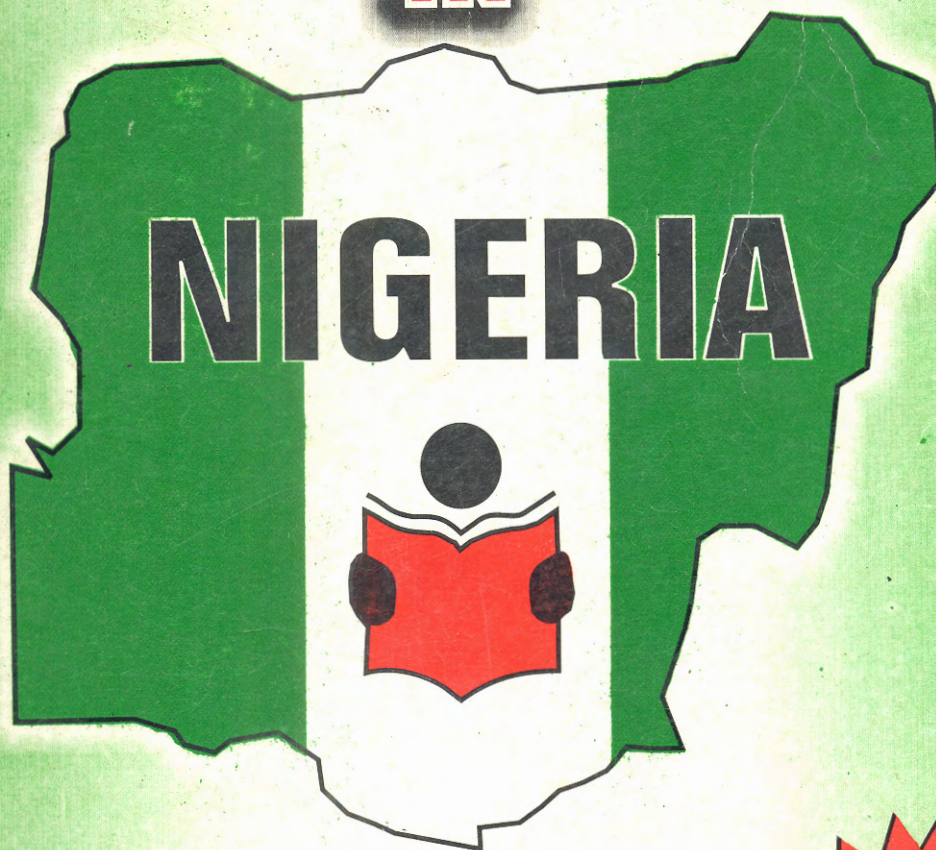


# **LITERACY AND READING IN**

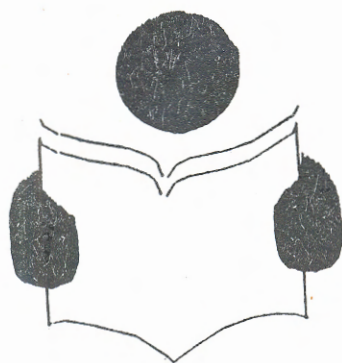


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# **LITERACY AND READING**

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**NO 2**

**2002**

**A JOURNAL OF THE READING ASSOCIATION OF NIGERIA**

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# **PROMOTING WOMEN LITERACY THROUGH MEDIA COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES (LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND THE MEDIA)**

**TAIWO OMOJUWA**

DEPARTMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION  
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## **ABSTRACT**

*The fact that literacy is now a fundamental human right is not in dispute. Government efforts have been lacking in sincerity, commitment and proper coordination, and have thus not achieved desired results. As familiar strategies seem to have tailed as used, the time may have come when hitherto unused areas are explored as exponents of women literacy promotion one such area is the mass media. Since the primary purpose of the mass media is to inform, educate and entertain, this paper proposes a more innovative approach to how literacy development, especially of women, can be promoted using the media and its various media communication activities (both educational and entertaining).*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Literacy has been variously defined and this definition continues to change as societal needs and requirements change. This is hardly surprising as society is always in a state of change (where nothing is stationary) UNESCO, in 1988, defines illiteracy as "a gross violation of the basic human right to learn, know and communicate" (Omojuwa, 1993 has a more detailed discussion on this). In addition to its various advantages, literacy, according to Venezky, et al (1990: 24) "liberates ...is used to domesticate free individuals who would have otherwise been wild and unruly; ...illuminates the ways of God to humanity as well as serve as a bridge between individuals.

The development of literacy efforts in any society is a pointer to the fact that, that society is preparing for and is marching towards socio-economic and technological advancement. The near-absence of such efforts is a cause for concern in any country, especially in Nigeria

## **PAST EFFORTS AIMED AT LITERACY DEVELOPMENT**

The National Mass Literacy Campaign, which was launched in 1982 remains one of the most popular efforts in the development of literacy in Nigeria. The Agency for Mass Literacy partly funded by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), initially planned to eradicate illiteracy by 1996. But because it was not yielding positive results, the "goal-post" was shifted to the year 2000.

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It is clear to even the man on the street that this is a pipe dream. While one would not support the contention of Dukku (1995) and Bello (1995) that government ought to have used specialists in tertiary institutions rather than agencies and ministries for literacy program planning and execution, there would have been need to involve all these bodies in such a project.

For instance, between 1990-1995, 274, 688 males and females enrolled at the Kaduna State Agency for Mass Literacy in the Basic Literacy program. It is disheartening that out of this impressive figure, only 58,278 completed the course. Out of this latter figure, 25,636 were women. This is an indication that less than half of those who enrolled actually completed the course. The present writer, in an earlier study on the Kaduna State Agency for Mass Literacy, concluded that the program falls short of expectations, as well as the fact that "government somehow has misplaced its priorities" (Omojuwa, 1997)

In Ahmadu Bello University, (ABU) Zaria, the Centre for Adult and Extension Services (CAEES) also had a mass literacy section, where the men enrolled for the Basic Literacy Program (BLP) and the women for Women Literacy Program (WLP). These programs admitted girls and women on one hand, and men on the other hand, who could neither read nor write. The men came for their lessons at night since they had to provide for their families during the day. But most of them promptly fell asleep as soon as the lesson started. These eventually dropped out of the program.

The women, burdened by additional responsibilities like pregnancy, child-care, domestic chores and constraints like early marriage, total/complete dependency on their husbands and, fathers, among others strove to become literate. Some of them succeeded, while some paid too much attention to ceremonies, which proved detrimental to their studies.

The problem with the CAEES was first its inability to pay the instructors participating in the literacy programs. Then the Centre was indicted on several alleged accusations, which include mal-administration and misappropriation of funds. It was "permanently scrapped" in 1996 (ABU News Bulletin June 10). So far, it is only the Agency for Mass Literacy that runs literacy programs. Even the way the existing programs are run is not encouraging.

The acquisition of literacy enables an individual to gain access to unprejudiced information, especially in this new democratic dispensation. If the electorate must participate, effectively and meaningfully in political decisions, they must be made literate, so that they can understand the philosophy of the government, which seeks their approval to govern them (Anyawu, 1981: 33).



Omojuwa (Op. cit.) reported that literacy is absolutely essential to the individual. It gives people a clearer focus of their thoughts and vision, sharpens their appetite for knowledge and improves their economic and material status and prospects. Literacy has even been glamorised when a respondent to a questionnaire in the same study, noted that illiterate women move in groups because they lack the confidence to walk alone. But now, she is literate her poise and deportment has actually improved. This has consequently led to an enhanced self-esteem. In a study conducted in Nepal, it was observed that literacy programs that went beyond the teaching of words provided a forum for all kinds of positive awakening of the knowledge and power contained in words, they found "moral strength and a legitimate space to discuss and reassert their subjugated knowledge" (Parajulli and Enstin, 1990: 2). Even global organizations do not underestimate the importance of literacy. For instance, it is stated by The World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) (1990: 16) that:

*Literacy programs are indispensable because literacy is a necessary skill in itself and the foundation of other life skills.*

### **FACTORS MILITATING AGAINST THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERACY**

There are several factors impeding the development of literacy. One of them is government's laissez-faire attitude to literacy. Its concern is shown theoretically only in policy decisions creating Agencies for Mass Literacy, Ministry for Women Affairs, Family support Programs, celebrating International Literacy Year and other related activities. Umar Aji (1996) observed that no fewer than 40 million Nigerians are illiterates.

Still, the government is not taking decisive steps to eradicate illiteracy this debilitating disease that has refused to be cured. In spite of lofty policy decisions and pronouncements, we are still a country where most women are illiterates. Oyediji (1997: 8), citing a World Bank report (1988), identified the fact that 47 million out of 88 million Nigerians are illiterate and that this ranks us fifth out of ten of the most illiterate nations in the world. He concludes that the problem is political will. He goes on to argue that government is probably keeping people illiterate and ignorant in order for them to be governed with ease. This is based on government's nonchalant attitude and its unsuccessful attempts to eradicate illiteracy. There is no doubt that literacy is the basis for educating the electorate for a strong and viable democratic process. It follows, therefore, that if people are illiterate, they will not know what is right, and if they hardly know what is right, how do they ask or even fight for these rights?

Another factor is the attitude of the illiterates themselves. Since there is no monetary value attached to literacy, people see it as if they are doing favors for the government rather than freeing themselves from the shackles of ignorance, poverty and disease. Some prefer to abandon their lessons for farming, trading, etc., thus relegating literacy to the background.



Also, educational materials and resources are either mismanaged or are not available, if adults have to be motivated to learn, the learning environment must be conducive for an increased and qualitative output. Literacy, as a means of self-improvement, must be emphasized because it is a practical necessity for every individual who hopes to live and make his contribution towards the progress of his society.

A dearth of reading materials was also observed. The new literates, with nothing to task their newly acquired skills, quite easily regress after some time.

### MASS MEDIA COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

It has always been said, "the pen is mightier than the sword". The mass media is a market place of ideas, and purveying information is its primary responsibility. The power of the written word cannot be underestimated as an instrument for social change. Yussuf (1991) says that:

*The all pervading influence of the media cannot be defined even in dictatorial and closed societies, because the dictator will need the media to communicate his orders to his subdued audience...*

The media owes the public the right to fair, full and objective information, which cannot be obtained effectively unless one is literate. To fulfil the 'inform, educate and entertain' role, the media has been classified into three: Print, Electronic and Other media. The media communication activities have, therefore, been subsumed under these three. Literacy has also been classified into two aspects as far as its development is concerned: (a) Public enlightenment campaigns encouraging literacy as well as the advantages of literacy (b) The actual teaching and learning to read, write, add, etc.

#### Print

The Print media include magazines, cartoons, advertisements, newsletters, photographs, calendar, billboards, notice boards etc. The photojournalist can take pictures for use in either category a or b (above) and a photo-story, magazine/newsletter could start from there. Billboards, notice boards could also advertise the enormous advantages of literacy. (It would go a long way in helping the development of literacy if these advertisements are free).

#### Electronic

The major electronic media are the TV, the Radio, Video and audiotapes. Films also belong to this category. For the purpose of the development of literacy, stories encouraging literacy

should be aired as well as stories depicting the disadvantages of illiteracy. Also, the audience would benefit a lot from talk shows. Here, the talk shows need not feature only women who have succeeded in life. Like a personality profile, it should depict the high and the low; the rich and the poor. For instance, a woman who has successfully completed her Basic Literacy Program could be invited to tell her audience how she felt before her achievement (pre-literacy); how she coped with her multiple roles in addition to her lessons and how she feels now (post-literacy). The most important thing is to ask her whether her life has changed now that she is literate and what she thinks she stands to gain with her new elevated status. This will act as a motivating factor for those who are still illiterate, as they would share the fears, hopes and achievements of the new literate.

### **Other Media**

Here, Drama, Poems, Songs, Street-theatres, Workshops, etc. that would enhance the cause of literacy could be used. Women can be encouraged to act out social situations where they can problematise social realities through drama. For instance, women who received an urgent message could depict the problems caused by ignorance but because none of them could read, they had to wait until it was too late.

### **How Women Have Fared**

So far, women are still being marginalized. According to UNICEF (1997), of the estimated 960 million, illiterates in the world, two thirds are women. Even with the low level of literacy, one would expect that women enrolment will be higher but Abubakar (1997) reports that studies have shown that this is not so. For instance, in Kano State, it was 88.3% male and 12.7% female.

The fact that women have not fared well is not in question. For instance, no provisions were made for the women involved in the WLP of the defunct CAEES, ABU, Zaria. The women have been abandoned to their fate of illiteracy, ignorance, etc. because the Centre was scrapped and there has been no replacement/substitute for it. For the women in Zaria Local Government Area of Kaduna State, the Agency is not doing enough to assist them. For instance, these women would have to be taught English so that they can speak the language. But there is no provision for this. The inability of the Agency to provide reading materials for them is another impediment.

If women want to be reckoned with, we believe they must influence and be influenced by the efforts to develop Literacy. They must empower themselves by being literate, informed and educated if they want to be the subject of the media in the three categories identified here. The image of women hitherto created by the media should change. There is more to life than reading the 'Feminine Column' or 'Woman's Page'. Literacy must be demystified.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of recommendations come to mind. The "University of the Air" radio and television programs made popular by the CAEES in ABU should be reviewed and revived for the purpose of the development of literacy. These would be educational broadcasts which would focus on the role of *(li(era)e)* women in the development of the nation.

If companies/organizations in the private sector are made to pay 2% of their annual profit as levy, then media organizations should be made to give free services as far as literacy is concerned. Those organizations who already have in place scholarship schemes should be commended for their foresight. But those who do not have should be made to contribute to the development of literacy in Nigeria.

Philanthropists and voluntary organizations should be approached for assistance in this area as government alone cannot bear the financial burden. Global organizations such as UNICEF, UNDP, etc who are willing to assist should be encouraged by a positive and result oriented output.

It is, to say the least, disturbing to see that while other nations are easily bestriding the technological highways and are forging ahead in other areas, we are still battling, directionless, with illiteracy in the new millennium. Thus, illiteracy should be tackled with a new zeal, a renewed determination to shed the bulk of our illiteracy burden and put in more positive efforts in this direction. Small prizes, awards, recognition, should be accorded literates who distinguish themselves in their literacy courses and practical applications.

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